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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: ASAD SPEECH: NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY TRUMPS UN
DECISIONS, BUT UNIIIC INTERVIEW NOT RULED OUT

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche, per 1.4 b,d.

¶1. SBU) Summary: Syrian President Bashar al-Asad followed up his meetings with Iranian President Ahmadinejad with a January 21 speech in Damascus in which he dropped broad hints that he might refuse to meet with UNIIIC investigators. At the Arab Lawyers Conference venue, Asad also specifically accused the Israelis of having poisoned Yasser Arafat and generally avoided talking about domestic reform issues. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) President Bashar al-Asad delivered a speech at the opening of the Arab Lawyers Conference in Damascus January 21. The conference opened with the slogan of "Defending Syria is a National Duty." Asad spent most of his address on foreign policy issues, with only a few sentences at the end touching on domestic (reform) issues. He broke no new ground in either area. Asad framed his speech by noting that what was happening in Syria and Iraq "is part of a conspiracy targeting the Arab nation." According to al-Hayat correspondent Ibrahim Hamidi, the pan-Arab lawyers' group he addressed is composed of attorneys throughout the Arab world generally on good terms with the regimes in their individual countries. Opposition lawyers in Syria for example did not attend. Contacts described the other speeches and the atmosphere of the conference the morning Asad spoke as strident, full of anti-American chants and shouts of support for Asad. Film director and opposition figure Nabil Maleh told Polchief the event was a "stupid pep rally" and criticized Asad for feeling such a show of support necessary.

¶3. (SBU) Asad pledged to continue to cooperate with the UNIIIC, but noted that "there is no cooperation without limits" and insisted that any cooperation must be "built on legal bases," otherwise Syria would be forced to cooperate "against its own national interests." He rejected moving from "the legal framework to the political framework," since in politics, "as you know, they can do anything, especially through the UN Security Council." He insisted that Syria "will not give up on the issue of national sovereignty . . . which takes precedence over UN Security Council resolutions." He did not refer specifically to any UNIIIC request to question him.

¶4. (SBU) On the peace process, he blamed its failure on Israeli lack of interest, and lack of commitment to the MEPP by "the international community." On Iraq, he re-stressed standard SARG talking points on its support for that country's stability and unity, and for the political process there (with the participation of "all the sons of the Iraqi people.") Regarding Lebanon, he criticized UNSCR 1559 as

having aimed "to bring about a coup in the political equation in Lebanon and the region by targeting the national Lebanese resistance and Syrian-Lebanese relations and by destabilizing Lebanon's internal security." He expressed support for initiatives launched by Saudi Arabia (and Sudan) to improve Syria-Lebanon relations and noted twice that "some Lebanese officials did not respond positively." Also on Lebanon, he dismissed the border demarcation issue and the need to resolve the question of Sheba'a Farms as "an Israeli demand" that would harm "the resistance" and benefit Israel.

15. (SBU) Asad also charged in his speech that the Israelis "carried out. . . the assassination of President Yasser Arafat." He noted that he was pleased that Arab lawyers who spoke before him had mentioned this allegation and urged the group to prepare a detailed study on this issue that could be presented at next Arab summit. He also expressed support for a Libyan initiative directed at the Arab League, calling for the establishment of an international investigative commission into Arafat's death. (Note: Asad made a similar accusation in his November 10 Damascus University speech and again in a December 5 interview on France Channel 3 TV, but did not specifically mention the Israelis on either occasion, simply noting that Arafat had been "assassinated" or "poisoned" in the Palestinian territories and died in France.)

16. (SBU) On the political parties law and reform issues, he very briefly noted that "we will come up with a number of plans which will reinforce popular participation and contribute to enriching the democratic life, whether those related to the law on parties, or the elections law and local administration."

17. (C) Comment: Many observers here had expected Asad to unveil, or at least elaborate on his support for, a new political parties law. He did not, instead merely mentioning the law once in the context of a brief few sentences near the end of his speech, referring to Syria's "continuing reform program" and the finishing touches being put on its 10th Five Year economic plan. His remarks on UNIIIC did not specifically rule out his being interviewed by the commission, but repeated in general terms the grounds he and other SARG officials have used to preview the rationale they would offer if there is a decision not to be interviewed. However, the specific formula he mentioned, that sovereignty has precedence over UNSC resolutions, is new. The betting here is that he will in the end accept to meet with Brammertz, although SARG officials will strive mightily to dress up any such interview as a mere courtesy call or something similarly anodyne that they can market domestically as sticking to national sovereignty principles. Some observers commented that the lawyers agreed to stake out such a supportive position for Asad in exchange for having obtained his commitment to release the two former MP's Riyad Seif and Ma'moun Homsy. End Comment.

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